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Holding His Fire

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DARYL SCROGGINS

HOLDING HIS FIRE

- Runner-Up: Big Sky, Small Prose Flash Contest -

BEFORE HE DIED from spilling bug killer on himself, Mr. Gallardo would show us neighborhood kids his command center. If you knocked and offered to mow his lawn or clean his gutters, anything, he would open his door and tell you to come on in. Most of his house never had any lights on.

What he liked to show off was in a room with a world map on the wall, where bright tube lights made you squint. There were racks of rifles and shotguns in there, and a long table that looked like it was made out of pistols. He made his own bullets at a table on the other side of the room, and he showed us special kinds he had invented himself—some he said could never be sold, even in America. He had a 4 gauge shotgun shell he said was filled with glass eyes. He had a pistol cartridge with a star-shaped slug that he said would turn into metal spaghetti on impact. I think he had some magical beliefs too, because he said he had a shell that Would Not Fire unless you said a secret word before pulling the trigger, and a pistol that, if stolen, would fire the first time the muzzle lined up with the thief's face.

We compared stories after he died, and we had all asked him what gun he would use on a Tyrannosaurus Rex. He had it in the crawl space under his closet floor. The barrel was as long as he was tall, and instead of a stock it had a trailer thing with wheels that unfolded, and it had chains

and metal stakes to keep it from rolling back too far when it was fired. Whenever someone asked him if he had ever shot it, he always said he would not have a gun he had not fired. I was the one who had to go and ask him how that could be true, if the new gun you buy has never been fired before you shoot it, you own it and haven't fired it. I think that hurt his feelings. He stopped letting me in, and everybody says that was the start of him not being so friendly. I said I was sorry, but they all said who could tell what might make a guy like that go twitchy.

But I think maybe a question can kill you. One that has the magic in it that has a way of slipping up on a person like a little piece of dirt in your mower's gas tank.

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AN AMBULANCE CAME, and they took him out of there, and then the bomb squad came for the gunpowder. There was yellow tape all over the place and extra locks put on all around, but Mr. Gallardo had shown us The Tunnel. A tunnel works both ways if you know where the booby traps are, and we did. He had said he didn't have any family, so we figured it would be a shame to see the police get everything when they already had a SWAT team.

Someone said the funeral home director let a story slip out about what happened when Mr. Gallardo was cremated. There were some loud popping noises while he was in there going up in smoke, and when they raked up the ashes to put in an urn they found an almost melted .22

derringer. It was a mystery, but we figure he knew he'd be going to the hospital when he called 911, and he didn't want to go unarmed. So he, you know, did what people do when they hide drugs.

As far as I know the T. Rex gun is still there. It would be hard to get it through The Tunnel, so you would have to take it right out the front door. I bet there's at least one pistol still in there too.

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SOMETIMES, I DREAM about that big gun in the crawl space, and it's always the same dream. There's a family like mine living in that house, and aliens are invading, everything blowing up and people screaming, and everybody runs to hide under the floor. Someone shines a flashlight on boxes and boxes of ammo stacked up all around. They are wondering what it's for when the spotlight finds it—the only gun that will make you feel safe again when you don't know what world the trouble is coming from.